

Telecommunities Canada: a brief history

Telecommunities Canada (TC) was formed as an association of associations at a meeting in Ottawa in the summer of 1994. This was at the height of the development of "Free-Nets" in Canada. Over the years the organization has evolved with the changes in the response of Canadian communities and individuals to the reality of life on line.

What began as a group of Free-Nets has evolved into what are now more generally known as "community networks". There is no one handy definition of what constitutes a community network. This may be a frustration to some, but it illustrates a very important point. How we all deal with life on line cannot be neatly categorized. Every local context requires it's own local solutions. Top down conceptualization just doesn't work.

For that reason, TC has really always been a networked community of practice for sharing and advocating the experience of community online as a process, and not really worried about defining community networks as institutions.

TC and the regional and local associations which it supports can look back on a number of accomplishments over the more than 10 year history.

There have been many instances where we have provided critical reviews of federal policies on what is now called the uses of ICTs for development. And key TC members have used it as a sounding board to support their own interventions into provincial programs and policies.

TC was one of the founding organizations involved in the development of the Global Community Network Partnership (GCNP) - an informal international group that has sponsored several international conferences. GCNP was important to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Civil Society Secretariat who recognized that GCNP was an example of new forms of organization that directly embody the concepts of an "information society" on its own terms. GCNP was actively recruited as a participant early on in the WSIS preparatory process. TC formally registered with WSIS and has provided considerable input into the process.

When Industry Canada's Community Access Program (CAP) was launched in 1995, TC was one of the agencies invited to be on the national advisory council.

TC, with support from Industry Canada, developed a template for community portals. A good example of this can be found at portal.victoria.tc.ca

It is an untold story that many high profile networks in Canada are actually rooted in connections that occurred through TC

- When National Capital Freenet appeared in Ottawa, it showed the Government of

Canada that the Internet was going to have a significant impact on daily life. NCF's specific example was the basis for SchoolNet and CAP.

- Most member agencies have been fully involved in the CAP program and we continue to support CAP and the advocates who form the "CANCAP" group.
- The Pacific Community Networks Association has gone from a British Columbia Free-Net organization to being actively involved with many agencies in BC and the Yukon that are working with all aspects of community ICT.
- The Gold Trail Open Network Society is a pioneer in community broadband development and fibre deployment. Their exemplary online training materials, "Community Network CRAFT" can be found at www.gtnet.ca
- The Chebucto Community Network in Halifax was the source of the "Chebucto Suite" an innovative software program for community networks that is still being used by some of them to this day.
- The Vancouver Community Network has been very involved with many of the NGOs in its community and its initiative in taking the Federal Government to court and winning are the reason that so many of our members are registered charities to-day.
- The Victoria Telecommunity Network has recently developed an extensive Voice Over Internet Protocol network which can be seen at voip.victoria.tc.ca

TC has also been actively involved in studying the evolution of ICTs and their impact on communities. In 1995, TC undertook an early study for the Office of Learning Technologies on community networks as a resource for citizens seeking employability skills and employment opportunities. Members have submitted papers to numerous national and international conferences. In 2003, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council approved a 3-year, \$1 million grant to the Canadian Research Alliance for Community Innovation and Networking (CRACIN), a group of researchers which includes TC, with 2 board members as co-investigators on the project and several others as community partners on various case studies. CRACIN brings together leading Community Informatics researchers from across Canada, and internationally to investigate the main Canadian government programs promoting the development and public accessibility of internet services.

In all these activities we have sought to understand and shape the uses of ICT's in our communities. The experience we have gained through our actions and our connections have led us to believe that there are effective policies and practices that are absent from public policy debates on the uses of these technologies in our communities. Actively cooperation with a variety of Canadian citizens' organizations that participate in public policy debates on universal access, convergence in telecommunications, and Canada's transition to a knowledge society, we have brought our concerns and recommendations to

various public forums including:

- Formal interventions in several CRTC public hearings, including information highway convergence in 1995, and Internet regulation and New Media in 1998.

-

- All phases of the Information Highway Advisory Council process and the Blue Ribbon Panel on Smart Communities.

-

- 2005 national review of Canadian telecommunications policy

In all of these efforts, we were advocating for a greater voice for community online and the recognition of its essential role in economic development

“In our statement “Beyond the Information Society,” which was presented at Paving the Road to Tunis - WSIS II: Canada's Civil Society Views on the Geneva Plan of Action and the Prospects for Phase II” -- a conference organized by the Canadian Commission for UNESCO in Winnipeg from May 13 to 15, 2005, we repositioned community as the primary agent in the current discussion on social change in the world of rapid technological advancement. We argued that what is really needed is a “Learning Society” – a world which enables communities to access and use the resources they need, including electronic resources, to improve their condition and position in a globalized context. This means sustained financial and program resources that support community-based initiatives.

The internet has changed considerably since the early days of TC when simple search tools like “gopher” were still a source of amazement. In a very short period, in Canada, at least, it has changed how we work and how we play. In this process, policy and practice have not always moved in lock step. We continue to seek opportunities to help reconnect the two.